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Germans Need CAMRA spirit

Interbrew's takeover of Beck's and Diebels plus Heineken's stake in Paulaner aren't the only threats to Germany's brewing traditions. *Thomas Perera* goes shopping on a budget ...

IF you have a question about German beer, don't ask a German: he won't know. It's not just a language problem; it's the whole cultural identity of the people themselves.

A German would be astonished at the very idea of CAMRA. Germans who don't actually make or sell beer for a living hardly think about the subject. Why should they? Since 1516 all German beer has been good, thanks to the Reinheitsgebot, which protects them from all evil - doesn't it?

I've been trying to wake my German friends up to beer for years. It's very slow going. When I tell them they've got over 1,200 breweries and that those 1,200 breweries brew more than 5,000 beers, they grunt and say 'so what?' And when I try to explain that be'ng satisfied with the two beers that make up 95 per cent of local consumption is the same as being satisfied with a restaurant that only has bratwurst and schnitzel on the menu, they think I'm crazy.

The truth is that no-one suffers here for lack of a good beer. I could blindfold you and spin you around in the town centre and let you head out in any direction, and any pub you hit would have good beer in it. So what's my problem? In the,quarter century I've lived and travelled in Germany, I've noticed a slow change that frightens me.

The German has never been one to throw money away. I wouldn't say they're mean, but they appreciate value for money. The streets are filled with Mercs and BMWs, houses are well built, shoes and clothing are made of quality materials, and the beer they buy by the case in the supermarkets is usually of premium standard.

The average cost of a case of premium beer is about 20 marks, or a mark for a half-litre bottle. There has always been cheaper beer, dusty and hidden away in a corner, sold for perhaps 75 pfennigs and only bought by students, seniors on a fixed income, and street drinkers. Just a few years ago, you would have been embarrassed to be seen buying such a thing. But times have changed.

One of the results of the fall of the Berlin Wall was the arrival of beers from old East Germany. Many - Hasseroder, Elbauer, Radeberger, Kostrizer - not wanting to look like poor relations, put on their Sunday best when they came west.

But others, like the Oettinger brewery of Gotha, had a better idea. They decided to brew everything. Name a type of German beer from Pils to Alt to Schwarzbier to Urtyp, they brew it... and sell it at half price. And people buy it.

I tried Oettinger myself and it wasn't bad. I tried it again a month later: it had changed somehow. A month later it had changed again. In truth it was never really bad; but there seems to be no quality control. The big thing, though, is that these brewers have come on big and unabashed.

The cases stand tall and proud, no longer hidden in a corner. This sales tactic fits the German personality perfectly. It's the same with the concept of 'fruhshoppen', which means early morning drinking. If there's something that society normally looks down on, bring it out in the open, give it a name and a respectable place to happen, and it happens.

It's still unusual to see such beers sold on tap. I know of only one pub that sells Oettinger. But Germans are fond of the grill party, when friends and neighbours gather in the back yard for sausages and beer, and more and more of these bargain beers are finding their way into such affairs. If this trend keeps up, it's only a matter of time until the pubs bow down and introduce these bland beers to their cellars.

Where does cheap beer come from? I'll tell you. One way to brew cheap beer is to pay low wages. In the old East Germany most workers are paid less than their western counterparts. That's slowly changing, but it's still happening today.

Then you can save money on ingredients, like hops. Not all hops are equal, and anyway who needs the whole hop when you could use an extract? (In fact Oettinger lists 'hopfenextract' on its label). The same goes for barley, where there is also a range of quality and price.

Lagering is another area where savings are possible. The word lager means to store. Why let the stuff sit around in storage for two months when two weeks will do?

Hence you have a product that is reinheitsgebot, well-marketed, saleable, but as bland and forgettable a beer as you never wanted. You can drink these things and not die, at least not immediately. Exported to a hot climate, they might even quench a thirst. For those who don't know better they might even taste good.

But if you are a person who holds beer as close to your heart as I do, this sounds almost like the clang of doomsday. What's worse is that even respectable brewers are discovering the advantages of brewing cheap beer.

It's a fact of life that sometimes a good brewery, producing top quality beer, has more capacity than it needs. Should it work a four-day week, or should it cheat a little by brewing a lesser product, bottle it under some biery-sounding name, and sell it somewhere else - England, maybe? Who would know? Many of the German lagers I see sold today in England I have never heard of and can find no listing for in my library. Lord knows what they are or where they come from.

I've spoken many times to brewers at some of the country's biggest breweries, and much as they love to talk about their beer, they tend to mumble and look uneasy when the topic of cheap beer comes up. On a visit last year to a large Alt beer brewery, I noticed a shipment getting ready to go out to Korea. I was amazed that such a delicate beer could be sent so far and I asked the brewer what he had done to it to prepare it for its journey. 'Nothing,' he said. I looked him in the eye and asked: 'Really?' He just smiled and changed the subject.

Then there's the supe market private label, with the brewery completely unidentified on the label. Don't ask the Supermarket managers where it comes from; they haven't got a clue. You could, of course, stake out the warehouse and follow the delivery vehicle back to its base, but what's the point? No-one really cares.

For most Germans are as innocent as children when it comes to beer. I'll give you an example. I'm in Holtbrugge's curing my thirst with a half-litre of Kronen Export when the door opens and in walks Jurgen, a pub regular, just back from a week on the Dutch coast.

'How was everything?' asks Hannes Holtbrugge.

'Good. The weather was fine, the hotel was okay, but the beer is terrible. Not reinheitsgebot,' replies Jurgen as he orders an 'Altster' - which is pils mixed with Fanta.

Thomas Perera

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